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## More groups getting involved in waste pits

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Posted: Sunday, February 5, 2017 12:00 am

By Marissa Barnett Galveston County Daily News | 0 comments

Over the past month, local groups have jumped into a contentious debate over what to do with about 30 acres of toxic waste, some of it partially submerged, along the San Jacinto River on the north edge of Galveston Bay.

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits were discovered in 2005 by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and scientific research has connected dioxins from the pit to contaminated fish in the bay. The pits were listed as an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site in 2008, setting off years of litigation and debate over how to clean them up.

In September, the federal Environmental Protection Agency approved a plan to remove the contaminated material and haul it off to a less vulnerable area for storage. The cost was estimated at \$97 million.

That plan has the support of nearby communities, the Galveston Bay Foundation, local lawmakers and Harris County authorities.

But the plan is facing backlash from groups who argue a permanent cap — a cheaper plan preferred by at least one of the financially responsible companies — is the less risky option.

In recent weeks, area groups worried about the downstream effect, such as the Galveston Maritime Business Association, the Galveston Restaurant Association and some local business owners, have waded into the fight.

“If anything ever happened to the bay, we could kiss the economy goodbye,” said Brian Jarvis, who teaches surfing lessons on the island.

Earlier this month, the state’s environmental agency, in comments to the Environmental Protection Agency, said it would not support full remediation without more information. State regulators appeared to imply support for a permanent cap.

Now, supporters of the Environmental Protection Agency’s plan worry opposition from some powerful groups in addition to a new federal administration could change plans to clean the site up.

### The pits

The pits were a dumping ground for a nearby paper mill in the 1960s.

Champion Papers Inc. owned the mill and hired McGinnes Industrial Management Corp. to dispose of its waste in impoundment areas near the San Jacinto River.

The northern impoundment area of about 14 acres is now partially submerged on the western bank of the San

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Jacinto River north of the Interstate 10 bridge. Another impoundment area of fewer than 20 acres is on a small peninsula south of Interstate 10.

The plans

The debate over how to best deal with the waste has basically come down to two options: excavating it in sections and hauling it to a permanent landfill site away from the waterways or leaving it where it is and building a permanent cap over it.

It will take about 750 years for the contaminants to degrade to a safe level, according to the EPA.

Hauling it is the more expensive option, but supporters, including environmental groups and local leaders, argue it will be safer in the long run. The site on the river is vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding, which could damage the cap, said Scott Jones of Galveston Bay Foundation.

“Do you trust a cap for 750 years with all of those unknowns?” Jones asked.

The company responsible for maintaining the permanent cap also would likely not be around for the duration to keep it up, he said.

The responsible companies, which will pay for the cleanup, have argued the permanent cap is the better option. Supporters for the permanent cap point to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report, which they say supports the cap as the safer option.

“It is disappointing that the EPA has apparently decided to ignore science and technical data,” McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. said in a statement after the EPA announced its plan. “Excavation will result in resuspension of the material, worsening the river and putting nearby communities at risk for years to come.”

A spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Research and Development Center said the agency does not take sides or promote one plan over another.

What’s happening in Galveston

Downstream in Galveston County, the plans for the pits were little discussed until recently. But in December, the plan drew opposition by business owners and other groups who worry something could happen while moving the contaminants that would send it spilling in the bay.

The Galveston Maritime Business Association and the Galveston Restaurant Association, a chapter of the Texas Restaurant Association, joined in the opposition to the plan.

“The potential impact of dredging the San Jacinto River would have catastrophic consequences on Galveston Bay’s ecosystem, Galveston tourism and the restaurant and hospitality industry,” said Anna Tauzin Rice, vice president of marketing from the Texas Restaurant Association. “TRA offers its full support to the recommendation that an armored cap is the solution to remediating the San Jacinto Waste Pit.”

The topic has been the subject of local meetings to talk about the proposal and plans for an armored cap, Jarvis said.


“We’re trying to spread the word,” he said. “Not very many people knew about it until recently.”

But supporters of the plan to move the waste said reliance on the Corps of Engineers report, which those opposed have pointed to, is misleading.


What’s next


The Environmental Protection Agency, which announced its plans to move forward with full remediation on Sept. 28, is reviewing thousands of comments received in response to the proposal, said Jennah Durrant, a spokeswoman for the agency’s Dallas office.

Opposition — or the appearance of it — from big lobby groups and the state’s environmental agency has supporters worried an Environmental Protection Agency under different leadership than the one that proposed the plan could dump the full remediation in favor of cap, Jones said. And abandoning a plan to remediate it could have dire consequences down the road, he said.


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